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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session and its contribution to shaping a gender perspective in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals

Statement by the World Youth Alliance, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

1. The World Youth Alliance joins the international community in marking the fifteenth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action and welcomes this opportunity to review the Platform for Action and look to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals through the lens of gender equality. Today, as globalization unfolds and new challenges and opportunities are presented, the rights of women, with their foundation in the intrinsic dignity of every human being, must claim our attention and direct our efforts in the work of fostering peace and sustainable development.

2. The recognition that all human beings have intrinsic dignity is the only foundation for human rights. It is the intrinsic worth of the human person that provides the basis on which to found policies and laws that create conditions under which human beings can flourish. Without such a foundation, human rights are articulated and enforced based upon the subjective preferences of those in power, thus undermining the entire human rights project and leading to violations of human rights.

3. On this anniversary, we recall that the rights of women have not always been recognized or respected throughout history. This was primarily because women were not viewed as having equal dignity to men. Today, although some progress has been made, women remain undervalued in the modern world for the contributions they make to their families and to society at large. Much of the work performed by women daily goes unrecognized because it does not produce immediately tangible results in a society where the pressure to "perform" and produce wealth quickly are primary values.

4. What are women's rights, and why do they need special recognition? If all human beings are equal in dignity, what rights do we attribute specifically to women? The most obvious and pressing are the reproductive rights relating to maternal health. Women in the developing world still die in childbirth at incredible rates, owing primarily to complications during pregnancy and insufficient access to emergency obstetric care. Protection of women's rights requires addressing this problem as a primary response to women, in order to respect their dignity.

5. The World Youth Alliance will evaluate the implementation of the Platform for Action in the light of the dignity of the human person and the needs of women in the area of maternal health. More particularly, we will examine the problems that currently exist in terms of guaranteeing access to reproductive health care when the dignity of women is not viewed as the foundation of women's rights.

Maternal health at the heart of development

6. Millennium Development Goal 5, on maternal health, is the Goal towards which the least progress has been made 10 years after the global commitments to address key areas affecting global poverty. In fact, maternal mortality is rising in the developing world.[1] The health-care needs of women are in many ways different from those of men, and special care is needed to guarantee that they are met, particularly in relation to maternal health, which is foundational to the health and life of women, their families and their communities. Access to basic maternal

[1] *Millennium Development Goals Report 2008*, United Nations (New York, 2008), pp. 24-25.

health-care needs, such as skilled birth attendants, pre- and post-natal care and treatment for obstetric fistula, are still severely lacking in rural areas. Increasing numbers of women are not receiving the necessary care to ensure the safe delivery of their children.

7. Our response to maternal mortality must be founded on the dignity and worth of women themselves and on their aspirations and desires to found a family and bear children. The right of all persons to found a family, determine the number and spacing of children and have access to maternal health care is firmly established in international law.[2] In order to respect this right, the State must work to provide the infrastructure necessary to deliver basic emergency maternal health in even the most rural areas.

8. Maternal health occupies a special place in our efforts to achieve development because the health of women — particularly mothers who have formed families — is critical to achieving development at the most local levels. The family is the fundamental unit of society, responsible for the protection of new life and the formation of the next generation in solidarity. Women exist at the heart of family life; their death during childbirth threatens the entire development project of their family, village and society. The health of children depends on the health of the mother. Healthy children are drivers of development and prosperity.

9. We know that maternal health is a condition for development, since children are 10 times more likely to die prematurely if their mother has died.[3] A motherless daughter has an increased risk of being trafficked for sexual exploitation. A motherless boy has an increased chance of being exploited for forced labour, and the family is more exposed to risks associated with contracting HIV/AIDS. The health of the entire family is threatened when a mother dies as a result of childbirth. Poverty, instability and human rights violations are the results.

10. To achieve Millennium Development Goal 5, we must separate the right to maternal health from debates regarding access to abortion and family planning. The Goal itself distinguishes between reducing the maternal mortality ratio and "access to reproductive health".[4] The women who are currently at risk of dying in large numbers across the developing world have already made the decision to bear children and require services to ensure their own health before, during and after pregnancy, and to ensure the health of their newborn children. Efforts to lower the rate of maternal mortality are misguided when the overarching presumption is that women would rather not have children at all. When funding is directed only to the areas of family planning and abortion, this presumption prevents women from realizing their human rights in the area of maternal health, rights that are specific to them and lie at the heart of the Beijing Platform for Action, and are also reiterated throughout international legal instruments.

11. Statistics show that maternal morbidity is highest in the rural areas of developing countries. This means that most women are dying because they cannot reach hospitals or physicians when there are complications during pregnancy or at

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[2] Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, para. 7.12; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 16; and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, article 12.

[3] United Nations fact sheet on Millennium Development Goal 5 (2008), p. 1.

[4] http://www.mdgmonitor.org/goal5.cfm.

delivery. The developed world reports no difference between rural and urban women in terms of maternal mortality rates; this is due to the presence of functional health delivery systems, which include the training and deployment of skilled birth attendants. Health delivery systems must be created and made available in order to ensure maternal health in the developing world. Health-care delivery systems that can address obstetric complications are the primary factors in reducing maternal deaths.[5]

12. Respect for women's rights requires the commitment to providing maternal health-care delivery systems to all women, including those living in rural areas.[6] Attempting to solve the problem of maternal morbidity by encouraging women to have fewer children is not a gender-sensitive response, and, in fact, violates the rights of women. The exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms guarantees a woman's and a couple's right to determine the number and spacing of their own children. Policies must focus on providing the support and medical care that women and families want and require so as to enable women to bear their children with adequate medical care.

13. In conclusion, the international community faces the reality that Millennium Development Goal 5 is the farthest from being achieved and that maternal mortality in the developing world remains very high. The Platform for Action cannot be implemented without making progress on maternal health, as all development goals and society in general depend on the health of women who are mothers. Progress in the area of maternal health can be achieved only if the issue is addressed separately from that of the provision of family planning services, as maternal health policies must consider the desire of the woman to found a family, and States parties must recognize the irreplaceable social contribution that women make in bearing and raising children and in forming them as citizens to participate in the development of each particular society. States that do not recognize this critical contribution — and do not provide the necessary basis for providing maternal health care — cannot develop, since they ignore the fundamental basis of social progress. Without healthy mothers, children and families, social development cannot occur. Only a system that respects the intrinsic dignity of the human person will recognize and respect the development needs of women and invest in the future of society.

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[5] http://www.unfpa.org.br/lacodm/arquivos/mdg5.pdf, p. 278.

[6] *Millennium Development Goals Report 2008*, p. 25.